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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PRAGUE 000044

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SUBJECT: CZECH POSITION ON EU CUBA POLICY

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Classified By: Polec Counselor Michael Dodman for reason 1.4 b+D

¶1. (C) Summary: The Czech MFA appreciates reftel effort to remind European capitals of the real issues at stake in the EU debate over its common Cuba policy. Czech efforts are currently focused on establishing a meaningful format for the structured EU dialogue with the opposition. The Czech reading of internal EU debate in Havana since the partial unfreezing of relations is not encouraging: COMs focused neither on the substance of dialogue with the opposition, nor the need to rebuff Castro's attempt to split EU member states. The Czechs expect little progress at tomorrow's COLAT meeting, but promise to withhold Czech approval at the GAERC meeting unless the new measures have substance behind them. End summary.

¶2. (C) Polec Counselor met with Czech MFA Americas Department Director Edita Hrda on Jan 10 to deliver reftel points in advance of the Jan 11 EU COLAT meeting. Hrda welcomed the specific proposals in the U.S. paper and was especially in favor of the suggestion to invite U.S. and other missions in Havana to work with the EU. She appreciated that the U.S. paper was being delivered to all member states. Hrda said she had low expectations for the upcoming COLAT meeting, which she will send her deputy to attend. She expressed great frustration with both the form and substance of the internal EU debate, including:

-- Luxembourg has limited ability to moderate the debate. The Presidency's Cuba expert is, according to Hrda, an officer at the Luxembourg embassy in the Hague; Luxembourg has no mission in Havana, so the Dutch will continue to represent the Presidency there, preventing the Dutch from taking a more forceful position in internal debates (although Hrda also noted in passing that the Czechs no longer consider the Dutch to be their "partner" on this issue).

-- The first meeting of EU COMs in Havana took place the day after Castro's partial unfreezing of relations with EU missions. Hrda termed this meeting a huge disappointment to the Czechs. She summarized the readout from the Czech mission: the planned agenda was completely jettisoned; the Spanish and most other EU members discussed their happiness with Castro's decision and steps they planned to take to normalize relations; the Czechs and the Poles expressed frustration and tried to focus COMs on the mandate (from the December COLAT meeting) for them to prepare a format for the new dialogue with dissidents; the Dutch were essentially silent, except to note the need to force the Cubans to unfreeze relations with the remaining member states and the Commission (a point helpfully seconded by Portugal).

-- In the end the Dutch did circulate (but did not discuss) a draft proposal for the structured dialogue, which Hrda dismissed as a non-starter. The Dutch proposal calls for quarterly meetings with COMs from the EU Troika, does not specify the topics to be discussed nor call for a sufficiently broad participation from dissidents. Hrda stated clearly that the Czech government will not authorize FM Svoboda to support the December COLAT conclusions at the late-January GAERC meeting unless the Czechs are satisfied that the new measures are at least as significant as the previous EU common position.

¶3. (C) In terms of next steps, the Czechs have prepared their own draft proposal for the structured dialogue. It calls for:

-- all EU COMs meeting four to six times per year with a group of five to six opposition leaders (to be selected in consultation with dissident groups), at EU embassies or residences, with an agenda covering "political orientation of different groups; long-term vision of their role in the transformation; presentation of their opinions on substantial issues of Cuban political development and points of view on cooperation with the EU at the present stage, during the transformation process and after the transition to democracy."

-- monthly meetings of all EU mission political counselors with a rotating group of up to ten opposition leaders or relatives of political prisoners, at EU embassies on a rotating basis, covering "political orientation of different groups and their activities; information on development in regions; detailed information on persecution by government bodies; information on the health conditions of political

prisoners, development of their lawsuits in the period before judgment."

The GOCR intends to share this proposal with what Hrda termed the Czechs' "partners" -- specifically the Poles (whom Hrda singled out as having been increasingly supportive of the Czech position), Slovaks, Slovenians, and Germans. Hrda promised to study reftel points to determine which could be incorporated into the Czech draft.

¶4. (C) In response to Polec Counselor's question, Hrda said the MFA is united in its approach to the EU's Cuba policy. She noted that there had been some concerns from her colleagues who manage EU affairs on a daily basis that a Czech position in opposition to that of many larger members states could hurt Czech interests (she noted specifically threats Czech diplomats claim to have received from the Spanish that the CR would "pay a price" for its position) but said that all the important players on the question (she listed FM Svoboda, DFM Kolar, MFA Political Director Schneider and MFA DG for Bilateral Relations Bombasova) were in favor of the principled approach Hrda continues to recommend.

HILLAS